

Daniel Schorr

Candor And Honorable Men

If one CIA director can wear his lies as a badge of honor, it is fitting to award another a badge of dishonor for telling the truth. There is that sort of symmetry, but little other logic in Joseph Kraft's attack on William Colby for excessive candor in his book, "Honorable Men" (a phrase, incidentally, borrowed from Richard Helms). There is an Alice-in-Wonderland quality in a journalist indicting a spy master for insufficient secretiveness.

Kraft suggests ["Views of Colby," op-ed, May 16] that Colby was self-serving in his candor about the CIA's misdeeds when he testified before investigating committees, but the burden of his complaint is that "there was no intrinsic need for Colby to finger the personalities who wanted him to stonewall." Those personalities were Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Vice President Rockefeller. Rockefeller, in fact, went so far as to caution Colby to tell less than the whole truth to his own "blue ribbon" investigating commission.

Rockefeller and Kissinger may be grateful for Kraft's indignation in their behalf. So may Helms, whose actions were the principal subject on which the others wanted Colby to be less than forthcoming. (Kraft made a point of disclosing his friendship with Helms in a column in his defense last November.) Few others will welcome this curious tirade.

Kraft's position is tantamount to maintaining that it is all right to expose wrongdoing, but bad to expose an attempted coverup of wrongdoing if associates are involved—a position that we thought had become unfashionable since Richard Nixon.

I have not discussed this matter with Colby, whom (let me disclose) I admire at journalistic arm's length. I believe, however, that Kraft has distorted Colby's narrative and his role in this tumultuous period. These are some of the points on which Kraft misrepresented Colby's policies and actions:

- Colby, alas, planned no "act of contrition" when he received the 1973 inspector general's report on CIA misdeeds, but only a traditional containment of potential damage by terminating illegal and improper activities judged to be in danger of exposure in Watergate investigations. The catalogue of improprieties and the corrective guide-

lines were kept strictly secret within the agency— withheld even from Presidents Nixon and Ford. The latter first got wind of these activities when information taken from the inspector general's report turned up in December 1974 in an article by Seymour Hersh in The New York Times.

- Colby's (rejected) recommendation to Ford for a public statement on "Operation Chaos," the domestic-surveillance program, stemmed not from any desire to "calibrate the CIA on the issue of full disclosure," but from an assessment that a cautious admission might offset the impact of Hersh's story and avert a chain reaction. What most concerned Colby was trying to protect the portions of the inspector general's report that had not yet leaked—especially the section on assassination plots. Colby quotes Kissinger as telling him, after reading that passage, that "now I see why you couldn't" stonewall the Hersh story.

- The decisive indiscretion that broke the dam against investigation came not from Colby, but from President Ford, who referred to assassination conspiracies at a luncheon with New York Times executives. The Times agreed to keep it confidential, but the story was eventually reported by CBS News. Colby writes that he then "flung myself into a struggle" to prevent an investigation of this subject, but the Rockefeller commission insisted on getting unsanitized documents on the subject, which, to Colby's dismay, were later turned over to Sen. Frank Church's intelligence committee, becoming the raw material for a public report.

It is thus not true that Colby "wants to be better than the others, on the side of the angels." His account is of one who sought to make minimal disclosures, recognizing that his agency could be destroyed by a vengeful Congress if the agency appeared to be obstructing investigation. Members of the Senate and House investigating committees attest—sometimes ruefully or irritably—to Colby's skill in narrow response to questions, never volunteering information. (He managed to keep the Pike committee in the dark about a recent covert financing operation in the Italian election even while testifying about an older one.)

The picture of Colby seeking to save his own skin is false; he in fact made himself expendable. More accurate is the picture of the intelligence professional who assessed the perils to his agency and formulated a strategy of what, and who, might have to be sacrificed to save the rest. That meant, in the first instance, the jettisoning of Richard Helms, about whom Colby provided documents and testimony to the Justice Department and Congress when called upon.

I am not sure what Kraft means when he says, "These tactics, of course, did not succeed in saving the CIA." At last report, Langley still stood, adjusting its rumpled mantle of secrecy, fending off books by alumni who avow that Colby did not disclose enough.